

Two Vermont Colleges Look to Boost Student Retention

Creating a Retention Quilt

Southern Vermont College reports on results from the trenches

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The academic literature is clear: students with a college degree earn more and lead healthier, more productive lives than their non-degree counterparts. Moreover, the early weeks on campus profoundly affect the likelihood of students persisting through to graduation. With its significant enrollment of first-generation and underrepresented students, Southern Vermont College took a new road to meet the challenge of first-semester (and first-year) retention.

Many variables impact student retention: academic offerings, residential programming and the overall culture of the institution. New students need to feel part of the institution and connect to one another, to faculty and to the campus community.

To establish connectivity on campus, SVC focused on two strategies: 1) connecting with students *before* they arrive on campus and 2) intentionally linking pre-orientation initiatives with both orientation and events planned for students during the semester. Rather than one-time events arranged by Academic Affairs or Student Life, SVC aimed to create a quilt of events during a 12-week period. SVC's retention work, we believed, had to be "of a piece," by linking typically disparate activities through shared themes, teamwork and coordination among departments.

Pre-Arrival Engagement

In the past, new SVC students received an information packet from Student Life and registered in one of two ways: on campus during a designated, summer pre-orientation day, or when they arrived for orientation.

We adopted a different approach for academic year 2008–2009. In mid-summer, divisional chairpersons wrote personalized letters to students about the fall schedule and proposed selected courses for students to consider. Two weeks later, the chairpersons followed up with phone calls or emails to discuss fall schedules. This process engaged students and faculty in a dialogue well before the start of classes, preparing them for the living and learning community we seek to cultivate.

Closer to the start of the fall semester, SVC's provost wrote to students about an initiative that would begin at orientation when they would be presented with Natalie Bober's *A Restless Spirit: The Story of Robert Frost*. A chapter was enclosed, referencing Frost's apprehension as a young man when asked to read his poetry and to present his ideas about teaching writing. Undertaking both tasks helped build his confidence. The letter acknowledged that many new SVC students might feel anxious like Frost, perhaps questioning whether they would meet the expectations of being first-year college students.

Students were asked to read the chapter, reflect upon Frost's experiences, and write a one-page statement explaining their feelings as they prepared to transition from high school to college.

Parent Programming

For new students and their families, particularly first-generation parents, orientation can be stressful. There are mixed emotions about seeing a child off on this new adventure.

We sensed that the traditional "parent lecture" and "student panel" on separation at the start of school were not working well—as evidenced by questions, follow-up calls, and interactions between parents and the college or parents and students. As previous semesters started, some students called home to say college was not for them and they were homesick. A new approach was needed.

Forging a partnership with a local theater company, we commissioned the director to write six skits to be performed by professional actors and SVC student-leaders. The brief skits, touching on issues such as roommate concerns, lack of parental supervision, academic success, being overwhelmed with the newness of college and helicopter parents, were performed for new students and again for parents. Afterward, the dean of students led discussions with help from the director of counseling services. Later that day, faculty and staff led parent-to-parent conversations in small groups to enable parents to connect with one another and members of our community.

The first day of orientation concluded with a dinner and a new SVC activity, “Bookends of Your Education.” Each incoming student was presented with the Frost book, hand-signed by faculty and staff within the campus community—from the president to dining hall servers—again connecting students to staff. Each student was then personally welcomed into the community by team members.

During orientation, students visited the Robert Frost Stone House and Museum in nearby Shaftsbury where Frost wrote “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Over lunch, the students discussed Frost’s poetry, his experiences, and the written reflections they prepared.

Post-Orientation

Several post-orientation events were designed to create a continuum that enhanced campus connectivity, including a formal welcoming event, “Convocation,” held during the first week of classes. In his address, “Aims of Education,” the provost spoke of higher education as an entree into an ongoing human conversation to which everyone at SVC is invited to contribute. Students were encouraged to exchange simple, even handmade, gifts with one another—symbolic of a community of give and take.

A fireside chat series enabled faculty, staff and students to talk openly and informally about life at SVC.

The theater company re-appeared during the second week of classes for a reading of Wendy Wasserstein’s play, *Third*. The play, about plagiarism and profiling, was introduced by Wasserstein’s sister who lives in the area. This reading was followed by a discussion among the audience and the actors and, one week later, a discussion among students and faculty.

At semester’s end, the provost led a class on Frost’s poetry and his life. The conversation detailed how, through his life experiences and challenges, Frost changed from being self-oriented to becoming community-oriented. As students prepared to return home for the holiday break, this gave them a context in which to ponder their own experiences, challenges and changes.

These activities were augmented by other efforts. A case management team focused on students who were struggling—academically or behaviorally—and strategized outreach. We also had an active retention committee that recommended, among other ideas, a fireside chat series that enabled faculty, staff

and students to talk openly and informally about life at SVC. The series led to several actions to enhance fall retention, including introducing a formal intramural sports program and offering regular transportation to and from Bennington.

What the Data Show

SVC has examined the effect of new approaches for first-semester retention by looking at the percentage of first-year students who left the college at the end of their fall semester and the percentage who then registered for the following spring semester.

Table 1: Retention of First-Year Students at SVC

Percentage of First-Year Students Who Left SVC by the End of Fall Semester	
Fall 2005	Fall 2008
20%	3%
Percentage Who Registered the Following Spring Semester	
Spring 2006	Spring 2009
80%	91%

The data indicate that efforts have been instrumental for creating connectivity and building community at the start of this academic year. This economy presents added retention challenges, like unanticipated financial hardships due to parental job loss, loan reductions and diminished off-campus work opportunities. Nevertheless, the data show we are weathering the storm.

Anecdotal evidence suggests higher student satisfaction than in previous years. More students are attending athletic events and participating in activities sponsored by Student Life. Faculty report fewer student complaints about noise in the residential halls. SVC will administer the National Survey of Student Engagement this spring to see if what is now anecdotal will be buttressed by data. We are also examining retention from the first year to the second year. All of these data are being looked at in light of national norms at similar institutions.

Despite excellent progress on fall to spring retention, to paraphrase Frost, we have miles to go before we sleep. For now, we can conclude: strategies that are “of a piece” create a cohesive quilt covering new students’ needs and concerns. And for retention, that has made all the difference.

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